

Testimony of Middletown Local Early Childhood Council

Middletown School Readiness/Discovery Council

Before the Appropriations Committee

February 16, 2016

Senator Bye, Representative Walker, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Jessica Stewart and I am the School Readiness Coordinator in Middletown, coordinating not only our school readiness programs and funding, but also the work of our Local Early Childhood Council (LECC), and quality initiative supports for early care and education programs. All of the funding that supports the work of our LECC comes from the budget of the Office of Early Childhood (OEC).

Our LECC opposes the 12 million dollar cut to the Office of Early Childhood. A cut of this size will greatly impact the 19 years of work our community and others have spent increasing access to high quality, affordable early care programs for children and families as well as the local match funds and services for families in need.

We also oppose the block grant approach to the State Budget the Governor has proposed because it erases transparency for Connecticut tax payers. Without transparent line items, it leaves local programs in the dark as to how to proceed with serving children and families. Connecticut's tax payers vote into office Senators and Legislators we trust to balance our State budget, the block grant approach would eliminate your constituents voices. In addition, we strongly urge you to put a halt on all new initiatives during this budget crisis, so we can focus on existing services which are benefiting Connecticut.

The cuts to the OEC will affect Middletown programs and services such as: Care4Kids, Children's Trust Fund, Community Plans for Early Childhood, Early Literacy, Even Start, Head Start, Child Day Care Centers, School Readiness and Quality Enhancement.

School Readiness Slots

- Of the 277 children currently enrolled in School Readiness, 50% of incomes are below 25% of the State Median Income (SMI), while 86% of all families fall below 75% SMI.
- We need high quality early care and education options for families at an affordable rate - no access to affordable child care leads to the loss of jobs which in turn leads to increased access to State assistance by families, which in the end will cost CT more money.
- A cut in Care4Kids funding would be devastating to programs. Since 2012-2013 Middletown has seen a 41% reduction in Care4Kids collection. The original model for school readiness was a three legged stool: School Readiness funds, parent fees and Care4Kids. We are now trying to balance budgets on a 2 legged stool.
- It takes approximately \$16,000 per child per year to effectively support high quality early care and education programs, but with an average collection of \$12,000 per child per year

it leaves programs short 23% of the budget needed to pay Bachelor teachers \$25 per hour and Associate level teachers \$20 per hour. These are livable wages in CT.

- Programs are reimbursed on a slot usage basis which further leaves programs in the dark as to their total budget each year. One or two vacant slot during a month does not reduce program operating costs. These unpredictable losses are crushing programs not only in Middletown, but across CT.

Qualified Staff Members (QSM)

In Middletown we have 37 Qualified Staff Members (QSM):

- 10 hold Masters Degrees,
- 17 hold Bachelor Degree's,
- 10 hold Associate Degrees.
- 84% (or 31 teachers) are being paid at or below poverty level, which then leads to them qualifying for State assistance (the remaining 16% are public school preschool teachers).

We know how important it is to have a highly qualified and engaged teachers working with our youngest population, what we need to move towards now is adequate compensation.

Quality Enhancement Funding (State and Local)

Our local QE funds are used to help early care program meet the mandates of child care licensing, NAEYC accreditation and other OEC set funding regulations by:

- Provide 20 hours of professional development for community early care teachers on an annual basis to assist them in meeting licensing, NAEYC, and School Readiness mandates.
- In 14-15, three hundred and fifty six (356) early care teachers participated in trainings at an average cost of \$9.00 per person for all 20 hours of training. This cost can't be duplicated at the State level. It is done locally at this low cost by leveraging funds from local supports and due to our presenters offering a low fee or no fee for their training. This year we leveraged \$5,000. We also access free trainings through the Accreditation Facilitation Project, and have for many years; this is a valuable resource for us and this project is funded by State level QE funding.
- We also use the funding to provide onsite coaching supports for teachers working with young children to help them with learning experience planning, NAEYC as well as working with children's challenging behavior.

Community Plans for Early Childhood

In Middletown we use these funds to help support:

- The Middlesex Coalition for Children. The Coalition focuses on three areas:
 - 1) informing the community and mobilizing for action through monthly public meetings and task forces on specific problem areas (e.g. childhood hunger),
 - 2) 2) Legislative advocacy on children's issues; and
 - 3) 3) Inter-agency collaboration, coordination and planning.

- Our Local Early Childhood Council (LECC) which works to expand and strengthen early care and education programming in Middletown. The council meets monthly and coordinates efforts for our early care providers, children and families both at a local and state level.
- Opportunity Knocks (OK). OK focuses on children's health issues such as:
 - 1) nutrition and physical activity for obesity prevention,
 - 2) Social, emotional and behavioral health, and
 - 3) Oral health.
- We have mobilized dentists across Middlesex County to offer Well Baby Dental visits prior to age one, or at the time of first tooth eruption in an effort to reduce dental caries.
- We work on children's social, emotional and behavioral health through Case Consultation meetings as well as on site supports with funds leveraged from our local Middlesex United Way. Case Consultation meetings are held on a monthly basis so early care teachers can present a child they are worried about to gain new strategies, teaching techniques, and referral suggestions. Onsite supports are done as a follow-up to the meetings and provide further supports where needed for the children, families and teachers.
- Middletown is currently the only community collecting data on preschool suspension and expulsion, Case Consultation meetings and onsite supports have helped with this focus.
- Middlesex Hospital has been supporting this work for many years by committing \$40,800 annually to the OK position.
- These three groups all work together to help the children and families of Middletown.
- Through our local LECC and our local United Way, all of Middlesex County has an LECC and all work to provide supports for children and families in their community. I am lucky enough to be a resident of East Hampton who has an LECC, and my children attend an afterschool program that has benefited from the supports of the East Hampton LECC.
- LECC's know the needs of the families in their communities have built relationships with families and have helped and continue to help families access the services and supports needed to be productive contributors to the community and the state. We urge the OEC to work closely with LECC's to ensure State wide early childhood initiatives are successful. This work can't be replicated by the OEC for the same cost, and can't be done with the same efficiency as the LECC's doing the hands-on ground work.
- Through this funding we have also established the local PreK-K Alignment Committee, a group of over 20 individuals ranging from community preschool directors, kindergarten teachers, public school administrators such as the associate superintendent, an elementary school principal, the reading and math support staff as well as the Director of Pupil Services for the district. This group meets monthly, sets annual goals based upon the work all want to focus on such as Kindergarten transition, building family relationships, and working on how to best support children with behavioral challenges. This group also visits each other's classrooms on an annual basis to further relationships between the community early care centers and the public schools.

Early Literacy

These funds have been used for:

- Attendance Works incentive program for preschool families in School Readiness programs.
- A social worker to help work with families in need connecting them to community resources, and if needed referring families to supports services such as ChildFirst.

Funds are currently being used for:

- The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) was conducted in 19 classrooms throughout Middletown in the fall of 2015.
- Results of the ELLCO were reviewed in December of 2015, and since then we have implemented onsite professional development around Curriculum, approaches to writing with young children, as well as onsite one-on-one coaching. We will continue these workshops, and one-on-one supports, through June of 2016. We were able to leverage \$1,000 from the local United Way Women's Initiative by using our Early Literacy funds to support this award. Our local early care programs can't duplicate these on their already underfunded budgets.

While I understand Connecticut is in a budget crisis, the more we cut from children's services now, the more it will cost CT long term. For every \$1 invested now, yields a return of \$7. The work we are currently doing is helping to prepare children not only for academic success, but preparing them socially, emotionally, while at the same time supporting their families. Young children are the future, we need to make sure they are able to access the best possible care and services they need so 20 years from now they are giving back to Connecticut as employed and productive citizens.

Cordially,
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